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## Where She Always Was

Frannie Lindsay

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May  
Swenson  
POETRY AWARD SERIES



Where She  
Always Was

*poems by*  
*Frannie Lindsay*

foreword by  
J.D. McClatchy

WHERE SHE ALWAYS WAS



May Swenson  
Poetry Award Series

WHERE SHE  
ALWAYS WAS

*poems*  
*by*

Frannie Lindsay

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Logan, Utah

Utah State University Press  
Logan, UT 84322-7800

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Cover photograph by Meg Birnbaum  
Cover design by Barbara Yale-Read  
Manufactured in the United States of America

The following poems have appeared in the journals cited: "Magnolia," "Magdalene Bathing," "Should This Become Ordinary," (forthcoming) in *Endicott Review*; "Remains" in *Field*; "Mother's Goldfish," "Rain Turning to Snow," "Aging Nude" in *Folio*; "Midas's Daughter at Fifty" (previous version, entitled "Curing Midas") in *Graham House Review*; "Eve In Exile" (previous version, entitled "Eve's Last Words") in *Malahat Review*; "Pyre," "Urn," "Respects" (forthcoming) in *Salamander*; "Lighters and Knives" (forthcoming) in *Small Pond Magazine*; "Remembering Stars" (previous version) in *Windless Orchard*.

"Urn" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lindsay, Frannie.

Where she always was : poems / by Frannie Lindsay.

p. cm. — (May Swenson Poetry Award series)

ISBN 0-87421-581-1 (alk. paper) ISBN 0-87421-498-X (e-book)

I. Title. II. Series.

PS3612.L533W48 2004

811'.6—dc22

2004004431

*For  
Rosemary,  
no matter what*





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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my warmest thanks to J. D. McClatchy, Michael Spooner, and to Fred Marchant.

I am also deeply grateful to Gary Rafferty for his love, and to Terry England, Jennifer Johnson, Ann Killough, Deborah Mayhall-Bradshaw, Liz Moore, Susan Nissbaum-Becker, Susana Roberts, Aimee Sands, Catherine Sasanov, Steffanie Schwam, Wayne Trapp, Gordon Weissman, the SHR, the Brookline Poetry Series and the Joiner Center; and to my sisters Janet and Karen.

Finally, to Porgy, Henry, Rain and Cole and their Creator for the purest love there is.

In memory of Katherine Hamilton Lindsay, 1907-1996.



## FOREWORD

Back when, we were told to trust the tale, not the teller. More recently, we were informed that there are no authors, only texts willed into being by social and political circumstances. I don't think any passionate reader ever bought into that sort of poppycock. Not only does the writer—her ambitions, her background, her personality—fascinate us, but we know from experience what crucial perspectives onto her work this information offers us. There are two facts about Frannie Lindsay that I think are important to keep in mind as you read through this book: her age, and her music.

In a country where many poets have made belated debuts—Walt Whitman and Wallace Stevens were near forty when their first books appeared—Lindsay is pushing things. She was born in 1949, and endured a familiar apprenticeship, graduating from the Iowa Writers' Workshop with an MFA in 1979, winning fellowships and going to writers' colonies, publishing in the *Right Magazines*. Then, in 1991, she stopped. She didn't just stop the hamster-wheel of a career, she stopped everything. Poets have, of course, stopped writing, some altogether, some for a decade or more, most famously Paul Valéry, before resuming again. And Lindsay too resumed. In 2001, poems began to occur to her, in a voice much different from that of her earlier work. When I asked her to describe the effect of this "second coming," she was feisty in her response: "At middle age, I no longer have time to relax into easy poetry. I'd rather craft truth and wind up with a good knot in my shoulders."

Notice the canniness when she says her aim is to *craft truth*, with its implication that the "truth" is made up. That attitude may also be an effect of age. As a poet, Lindsay was educated in a certain way: probably taught by the New Critical doctrines of the day to appreciate poetry's textures and ironies. Having been grounded in a set of expectations, she next witnessed during the decades since the Sixties a pageant of personalities and styles flash and fade. She was old enough to be both surprised and unimpressed. Confessionalism's lash, feminism's earnest agendas, po-mo hijinks—they have come and gone, and left in their wake many ruined poets who had swallowed one party line or another. Lindsay wisely kept herself above—and then for a long while helplessly apart from—the fray. As a result, her poems are resolutely unfashionable, the way the best poems always are. They count lucidity

and reserve among their virtues. They won't be forced into areas of experience deliberately outré or manic. When she writes of love—which is to say, of soured chances and small pleasures—she writes with a wisdom that charges her metaphors:

What if I'd watched  
each time you grew almost lost,  
neither one of us trying?

The rain turning to snow  
won't tell  
where the first flake forms

its way through the downpour, avoiding  
shoulders, making its last  
slow choices.

Another virtue of age is its composure, and Lindsay's poems are alert as well to a rare sort of gentleness. It comes not from reticence but from understanding—as it was said of Tolstoy that he is the greatest of novelists because there was not a single human emotion that he did not know, understand, and sympathize with. Take her poem “Aging Nude.” She considers a model and an artist, but her little moral parable has everything to do with the flesh, with mortality and the feelings it forces. Her instructions to the painter end this way:

Think how little touches her  
already: gazes brushing past her  
like erasures. Don't make her young.  
Caress the stoop of shoulder, stomach,  
breast. Be exact in this.

*Or drape her, and in that  
be tender.*

She asks for either truth or tenderness. That tenderness does not consist in lying but in covering up. Who looks on her erases, who drapes her discloses. Throughout her book, Lindsay has written poems of remarkable sympathy—not identifying herself with old dog or dying parent, but keeping her distance, the better to take the measure of another creature. James Baldwin once remarked astutely on the way writing can—is meant to, really—connect us: “It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or had

ever been alive.” Lindsay’s poems throw out just such life-lines: fine filaments meant to catch our emotions and bind them with hers.

During the decade she abandoned the writing of poems—or rather, that it abandoned her—she returned to music. She had grown up in a musical family (her mother, a concert violinist, appears over and over again in this book), and turned, as she had when young, to the rigors of practice. She bought a grand piano, and before long was concertizing—Mozart and Rachmaninoff were favorites. It is impossible, reading her poems, not to hear a musical hand at work. This is not just a matter of delicacy or virtuosity. It is also a matter of knowing how to phrase a line. Dizzy Gillespie once noted that “there are only so many notes, and how you get from one to another is what makes a style.” Lindsay moves from detail to trope with utter poise, with an intuitive sense of what to sustain or emphasize. Her language is crisp. I can pick a stanza at random—

chafed wrists. In come the bits of foam  
from his bitten and mended bed.  
In twitch the ragged dreams

—and praise its plosive energy, its modulated vowels, its variety and élan.

What age and music both teach is patience. That is not the hallmark of beginners, eager to make an impression. At its root, patience is an allowance—allowing things to happen, in their own shape, at their own pace; and allowing yourself to endure them, whether to see through them or to see them through. *Where She Always Was* allows us, in turn, the rare gratification of watching a poet—wonderfully accomplished, quietly persuasive—look back on a lifetime’s worth of emotions and calculate their bearing on the present. In her craft is the truth. In our admiration is the lesson, and in that lesson is the further joy both of language with the concentration of prayer and of prayer as, in George Herbert’s phrase, something understood.

J. D. McClatchy





WHERE SHE ALWAYS WAS



# PART ONE



## GATHERING HIM IN

The old dog is gathering  
places to sleep. Into his callused paws  
come the torn brocade drapes  
I clean up with.

He is gathering in  
the shoes, the stuffed bone and his  
duck, and the real bones  
under his own

chafed wrists. In come the bits of foam  
from his bitten and mended bed.

In twitch the ragged dreams,

    pacing a path,  
    matting the weeds  
beneath his feet. And above them, stars

that leave no prints except  
sand and salt we tracked after us. Tonight  
I will bring all the snow into my arms

and build winter a dog  
curled under the willow that keeps close  
to its shade. Then I will carry him back  
to where his window's warmth of sun,  
left open a crack,  
has been letting sleep in.

## RAIN TURNING TO SNOW

How will I find you?

Blurring my breath against  
the storm sash, I can't pretend not to  
look for you,

while the rain gives its whole self away.

What if I'd watched  
each time you grew almost lost,  
neither one of us trying?

The rain turning to snow  
won't tell  
where that first flake forms

its way through the downpour, avoiding  
shoulders, making its last  
slow choices.

## FERAL KITTENS

You have to be so patient.  
*(Following, not following.)* Cradles  
are traps. *(Wait here*  
*where street shoes change*  
*without anything noticing,*  
*and you can float*  
*untorn over briar, stone: things*  
*that have given up*  
*listening.)*

What took you this long?  
Your pockets fallen  
empty of kibble,  
your trail of milk  
gone sour,  
while these three scrawny calicos  
coil like cobras  
*(fending off sleep. Close*  
*your eyes over them.)*

## MISSING

April has lost herself, torn the bark  
off elbows and knots, dropped her blossoms  
like pinned skirt hems. She isn't about to learn  
from the snow-tossed crocus—a single bright mitten—  
not from the ivy that clings too tight to climb  
cunningly over the dormer  
or the drenched knit cap  
snagged on the bramble's bite.  
Every dog sent out comes back one day too hungry,  
but the sun has stopped on the mud-bruised face  
of a girl who can prop herself up  
almost long enough to beckon the wind  
to brush her hair.



## FOR NADJA

Tell me about your death.  
Did it fold back the stiff wing  
of your sheet, and help you  
in, and lift your head, adjust  
a few last things, a nurse  
who knows this brisk routine?

Did you ask for ice chips,  
a moment breathing  
on your own?

When the shift changed,  
was the drape thrown wide,  
the gurney rinsed,  
and set adrift?

Then did you sink  
awake, leave behind  
your non-skid blue foam slippers,  
and swim

beneath the exit ramp,  
the parking lot, the grid  
of streets, with no belongings  
but that single leaf of air?

Did you splash  
back up at last, and shake  
your soaked, fine hair,  
and tread those first shallow hours  
with astounding frailty?

## GRADUAL CLEARING

Your once thick coat drifts and rips  
little by little, tossing among  
the limbs of lindens. Wind tugs  
at its tails, its cuffs until one sleeve  
tears free and turns into  
a lean cat ready to spring, and then  
a footprint. How close to here  
is missing? What else  
might pull the wrong thing home?  
Our house is starting  
to follow itself around: a ship bearing up  
under sails fraying, the weight  
of each bell chime filling the mist  
with things you held  
for as long as you could,  
until they had finished  
rising away.

## LADYBUG

During the night she had clenched  
between a field green and a crouton.  
I brought her out of the fridge  
stuck by a dot of parmesan dressing  
upside down in limp salad; her tiny legs,  
except the one flicking, lashed damp  
against her ebony belly; her red saran wings  
smeared shut. So when you came into the kitchen  
thuddingly happy, wanting  
to make our sandwiches, I had already  
grazed her off of a corner of dry paper towel  
onto the brick we used to wedge the window ajar  
the day, despite wrenching storms,  
that our love began to glide in  
by itself. And I lay her there on the gritty clay  
amazed by the science of tenderness, and  
how, without harm, the sun stilled her.

## TAKING OFF MY CROSS

I am so cautious, twisting apart  
the male and female halves  
of the barrel clasp. I know  
you will not understand.

There is your shirt, a parachute  
dropped from another buoyant  
embrace. Here is our quilt,  
and the dim cheek of light

on my breast. But this  
is a rite of distance. I bare my neck  
to only the evening heat;  
to almond and oatmeal soap;

to the abiding and ignorant balm  
of an old dog's breath.

## KISS, AFTERWARD

Sometimes, afterward, when I still can't look  
at my unlotioned legs or my belly  
you've dried with our coarse green towel;  
when my wrists still ache from priming  
your blunt and loose-skinned cock that hurts me  
with its dear perseverance; after I've come back to bed  
from the bathroom; I catch myself  
in the mirror I never let see me: its risk-strewn light,  
and I want you  
to grip me as hard as you can, to not be nice,  
to force me to watch you  
kiss my breast, to ground me from that  
wince of lightning.

## DOG, NAPPING

The breeze of his sleep is slow  
these past weeks: the dead-leaf  
twitch of his lids,

his mind drifting off as mine does  
when I worry too much  
to stroke his head.

Dust hugs the lime-green ball  
stuck under the couch,  
but for him, for now, all is toss and arc  
and when I lie down beside him  
to rest, his scrabbling legs kick my ribs.  
And I see

he is happy, and I am the one  
left weary from hoisting him up  
every week on the scale at the vet's;  
weary from prying his dank mouth  
open for pills; from keeping him  
close when he ambles away this simply  
over a meadow he's coming to know.

## HAPPINESS

Each day the dog forgets more of himself.  
One sore tread past the cracked one before,  
he doesn't mind his store-brand food,  
stained bed, same smeared thought drifting over  
the crest of his brain like a hand he has licked.  
Tufted grey toys in a box:  
death is death. Best, he likes tepid evenings,  
now gimping a little alongside the park,  
where children will not remember him.

## MAGNOLIA

Off comes the modest part  
of spring, the girl who grows  
too fast, her gloves and anklets torn  
on scant, young limbs.

Your gnarly grip has dropped  
from my slouched breast, my hand,  
veined now; my stiffened back.  
How slowly I have gotten dressed,  
yet this magnolia tree uncurls each fist  
twice as reluctantly  
these few chill nights  
it lets the bright dark touch it.



## RAPUNZEL DESCENDING

It takes twelve summers to build her  
the treehouse, hammering each rung in its time  
above the hot day dizziness, hauling the picture window  
up by a risky gold pulley, gripping the nails in his teeth  
like hairpins. He stashes each comb, each ribbon  
deep in his overall pocket, until she is old  
and can only bear to watch him  
through the clear ceiling with the distant pity  
of moonlight, wanting nothing of him  
but the scissors he stole from her years ago  
to snip the height from under them both,  
and love her, lock by shorn lock, to the ground  
for the rest of his shadeless life.



## PART TWO



## RESPECTS

I haven't been to my mother's vault  
except to bring a handful of tense young roses  
the street vendor gave me for free  
the day we locked her heavy ashes in. But I know  
how patient the sun on the Persian rug is there  
from its years of lifting the pigments, and how  
each sparrow outside the diamond-shaped window  
knows his place, perched on a wrist  
of bare forsythia, gazing into the crypt  
with all his weight and not taking wing  
when the first fatigued petals flare all the way back  
long after I leave.

## MOTHER'S GOLDFISH

My mother cannot remember  
the end of the Great War, except,  
as she tells us at dinner,  
she had, in 1918,

two goldfish: King George  
and the Kaiser, who died overfed  
on soda crackers.

She brings her words to the surface  
slowly, as if she had rolled up her frock sleeves  
and cupped her small hands  
in the cool of a prayer,

lifting two goldfish  
out of her damask napkin to pass around  
the table until the guest beside her  
places them back in her glass bowl heart  
with no words, no splash,  
and we go on eating.

## I LIKED MY MOTHER BEST

when she picked me up at the pond  
after skating, her shy strength  
flooding the wide vinyl seats of the Nash  
with the scent of the winter day ending right there  
on the tips of her pilled white mittens, with each  
bosom full of her enduring breath: a sky iced  
with the waiting of stars.

## BAD DOG MAN

My father shoves the garage door  
all the way up. It is 1956, he is home,  
our new puppy has gone  
to cower again behind the hassock.  
She is teaching herself to curl  
her vulva-like lips at the Bad Dog Man  
who flips on the lights, who won't let us  
sleep. In the bathroom,  
our tile-cold bodies take turns  
pressing against her. He won't let us  
cling to her paddle-shaped ears  
or her warm, ample scruff that morning  
he slams her—snarling and innocent—  
into the muggy crevice behind  
the back seat, then roars the motor  
that wakes us crying our heads off,  
backs up to before we are born,  
and screeches the red car away.



## UNDERNEATH

Then I would spring from the pool's dark end,  
kick as he showed me, and lock  
my arms around his goosefleshy middle.

I touched it by accident: his nipple  
pebbly under my stuttering thumb; I knew  
what it was yet I rolled it between

the wrinkles even a young girl gets on her fingers  
from playing too long in the water; and yes I knew  
the twinge that dove from his chest

to the droop in his swim trunks  
then rose, the head of a child who finally could  
tread, up squinting and straining  
like me, for air.

SATURDAY MORNINGS, 1954

Her nipples never hardened  
when I jumped on top of her in bed and yanked  
her nightshirt up and tugged them  
with my baby teeth. I'd wake her up  
with play-shouts: "Milk! Milk!"  
and she would have to let me straddle her  
birthworn belly with my pointy knees  
until I hurt her, made her wince  
with my tongue coiled from all the angry words  
I couldn't know yet, words  
I'd starve on, my tongue striking  
at the unresponsive button of one breast  
and then the other, blaming them  
for every drop of blue-white food  
her body might have made,  
that might have made her  
love me.

## BY THE LAKE

I will not miss his soup sent back, untouched;  
his metal tumbler by the sink, flat ice  
in warming gin.

Nor will I mourn his knocking cough  
imprisoned, nor his sweats. His wife's pill'd afghan  
is too dense for him these nights.

By the lake, he showed me  
how to leap stones over water, call  
a whippoorwill with flutter on our tongues

so she would answer.

Now wind with no voice left tosses bits of nest:  
sticks and moss like children's curls  
jerked tight, cropped short.

## REMEMBERING STARS

I'd think his hands were breaking  
so I'd come downstairs where he was  
crying, bring my father  
close, and set the gin down  
on the breakfast table,

lay him on his study couch,  
wrap him in his mother's  
afghan, dim the lamp. Then I'd sit  
on the stoop, my braids damp  
with him.

## SQUARE DANCE, 1956

August nights, dancers who barely knew how  
—children like us—would clumsily ask  
each other: the blinking tap  
on the lake-cooled shoulder, the hurried curtsey,  
because Pinky Johnson had finished twisting the pegs  
of his cracked fiddle, paused the bow  
over the gut strings, and  
all the pavilion's ramshackle silence  
had drawn the low, black beams  
of its breath.

## CELLO LESSONS

A fat Italian showed me how  
to draw the bow: index finger  
over the mother  
of pearl dot, the others curled  
across the frog  
and then the curvature of wrist,  
follow of elbow,  
opening the slow wings  
of my first note.

On Thursdays at six  
we'd rosin up, tune, assemble  
metal stands, adjust mine  
low, sit down,  
and start with easy Bach.  
I was twelve, he seventy,  
and brusque. And yet  
when I knew just enough  
he took my fingers  
in his fleshy hand,  
and spread them out  
in thumb position,  
difficult the first few times,  
as if arranging the woman  
I ached not to be  
beneath a featherbed, and then  
not touching her.

## THE CORRECTION

When I got it wrong at school—missed  
a word, could not recite  
the long division tables—I would lock  
my knees beneath my little plywood desk  
in back where all the tall ones sat,  
and sneak my uniform sleeve up  
and bite down on my forearm, make myself  
keep quiet, doing that, not  
crying; gnashing hard with my gapped teeth  
until the dotted “O” sunk in  
because I couldn’t hold my breath,  
so had to clench my skin while no sobs flayed  
my lungs: those lightless rooms  
where loud girls kept themselves,  
and stayed unsorry.

## MIDAS ALONE

Everything I look at now becomes a blossom.

I wish unsimply that you know

how blind I am by sundown, each numb star  
an ancient orchid.

I catch your breath amid the glistening  
of insects; and in dusk that wants a father, almost

touch your cheek  
the old, ungilded way God touched you.

I cannot bear to watch another petal sweep  
the shoulder of the haggard, gleaming girl  
who stoops above your grave.



## VIGIL

Finally she lay with the sheets turned all the way back;  
her wig gone, fever down; basking  
in breezeless sleep

while he came every hour to turn her, to place his fingers  
over the throat of her wrist as he'd been shown,  
and listen hard

for the black wing-swish of her pulse:  
a moth not flying, clinging  
to light.

## CHAGALL'S FLOATING WOMAN

Mostly she would doze, but keep  
her shoes tied, waiting for him to come home.  
He'd swoop her up:  
her crinolines skimmed tin roofs, her pumps snagged  
on willow tops. She was comic and robust;  
he slight and tense, afraid she'd drop.

Now she's much too light for him, the midair girl  
he's tired of painting: way too many  
fiddles, goats, and props.

He ties her gown and guides her  
to the john and back

against his thin, pocked arm. She dies  
having lunch, while they are laughing.  
She gags once  
on her tepid soup.

He shuts their book,  
the risqué, funny paperback they read aloud.  
Sometimes, mid-paragraph, she'd nap  
a minute, waxy nape against his shirt, and jerk  
her arm straight up

as if to signal him  
to set her down now; she had had enough.

## PERSONAL EFFECTS

### 1

For once not arguing,  
we divide among ourselves  
the things she left: her mother's mother's  
swan brooch, her piller and odorless  
brown coat, sturdy Timex,  
the night shirt she mended  
with clashing thread.

### 2

The morning before, I sat  
by my mother's bed  
to ask her what she would like  
the paper to say about her  
life. It was like being read a story  
backwards, the reader becoming  
the child afraid to fall asleep.

### 3

With the shift nurse helping  
and some baby oil, and trembling  
the way he did the day he slipped it on,  
my father bends over  
the quieted body I thought I saw breathe,  
and slides off her wedding ring.

## UNAFRAID

The doctor tells him to walk  
five minutes a day, then ten, then all the way  
to the letterbox. Instead he rests in  
the leather chair his own father  
wore the grain down on, no longer  
rocking, not doing his stretches.

After his pills he arches  
his knees up just till his hands can reach  
to nick off his slippers,  
turns his wife's favorite Dvořák louder,  
sets down his glasses and rubs  
the furrow of skin blurred red,  
then flicks off  
every light in the world  
with his cane's blunt tip,  
and journeys out.

## MOTHER

On the way to your death,  
I bought clothes.  
Flat dresses on racks: *daughter,*  
*daughter, daughter, daughter.*

I shopped for ways  
you had thought  
best of me: the brightest blacks,  
the smallest sizes.

I chose, at last,  
a stark tight number, and short.  
One you would not  
have approved of.

Next to the you  
that was left,  
I took your hand.

I was small enough  
to fit in your drying heart,  
curled up  
in its chapped cold fist.

Mother, this  
was *my* death. You weren't here  
to choose me  
a dress for it.

## URN

Her brow and knees,  
her brain  
and womb and ruined heart,  
her bowing arm,  
and breasts that fed  
no one, the foot that hurt,  
the cheek  
her father struck,  
all burned  
together: soot, light snow  
the spring that she  
was born.

## PART THREE





## COLD FRONT

On the days I can't love you  
I still brush my legs over our bed's edge.  
I thump my palms at the stuck window,  
and hear back again to the mockingbird's fragments  
of this and that; how he kept us  
awake in the light of each other  
until we were forced to follow his rumor exactly  
to where he balanced, plump as a heart  
on his strand of the power line:  
bird who can fool me  
mornings almost as sweet as those.

## MIDAS'S DAUGHTER AT FIFTY

Barefoot, I walk straight up to my father  
on the golden lawn  
and kiss him. All at once  
the faint lights of the violets  
burst back on. A mantis builds herself awake  
from prickling twigs. The rain begins.  
This is the world I meant to love.

Once he hoarded gems  
in a cradle only he could rock,  
and beat my heart with his clumsy hand.  
Now I watch him tear his tarnished gloves off,  
and shake out all the dread and blackened sweat  
from his stiff wrists, and toss  
his scared, new smile behind him.

## AGING NUDE

She might vanish any second  
into overalls and solid oxfords, leaving  
pen strands, scrawls of hair,  
anemone barrette unfastened.  
Or she might stay, and shift her posture  
when she tires.

*Instructions: study form  
by gesture. Keep the ink line  
of the body limber: thirty seconds  
without lifting nib from paper.*

Think how little touches her  
already: gazes brushing past her  
like erasures. Don't make her young.  
Caress the stoop of shoulder, stomach,  
breast. Be exact in this.

*Or drape her, and in that  
be tender.*

## LINES ON A WINDOW

Start me  
with a quick stroke:  
slackened breast to lap  
to knee then down  
to knotted foot, and up  
to nape. That fast  
I could unravel back  
into my drape, and then  
my mended overalls  
and anorak. I have  
a bus to catch.  
My body's late.  
Think of all the gazes  
whisking past me. Do not  
lift your hand up  
from the paper.  
Do not make me young.

## CINDERELLA AT WORK

I will grow old very suddenly, perhaps  
while waltzing. Today I mopped  
the scuff marks from the marble floor  
and memorized more dance steps. Aging  
is weeping less. I slept dry-eyed  
through last night's party. I envision  
ballrooms lit by zeal alone,  
tricked stars sliding  
in among the glazed white grapes.  
And while I sleep and learn  
and this sky rolls aside so slowly  
that my sisters think it's wind,  
the burlap curtain opens  
on a jacquard sky. And I know  
the whirring air is needles threading,  
dress remnants being joined by hand.  
And on the raveled outskirts  
of the last kept acre  
is a wish-worn, raspy voice  
amid bright weeds.

## THAW

I tried finding love for you  
while winter offered us  
false promises of snow.  
Instead rain froze  
the walks. My shoes soaked,  
inching toward you. My hands  
were always numb.

Januaries like these  
the flesh deceives the heart:  
ambitious sunlight weakens  
the hard soil, unjustly pulling up  
the buds of hyacinth.

We said harsh, polite goodbyes  
in February: finally  
cold enough to twist  
forsythia back in.  
Ice belongs on every twig.

And yet for the length  
of this poem,  
I invite you close again,  
offhandedly, an off-shore  
breeze, and only  
for a moment, while it's warm.

Please come.  
Please do not  
take off your coat.

## ANTIPHON

### 1

All the rain season my windows are portraits  
of you finger streaks down steam  
on those meds you can't cry

your name is my  
expired address every letter comes back  
crossed out a page from a diary  
torn

by that urge of yours to wake up  
amid things you can still break:  
each faint, stupid star like a cheap teacup  
and your cold sweat splinters of dew  
in my courtyard  
I can't sleep one second longer  
your pen's on my pillow

### 2

on these meds I can't cry  
so I streak my finger  
down the steam on each window  
draw portraits  
name hurricanes  
after the dolls I dressed and rocked  
whose eyelids clicked all the way back  
as for me, I look old  
in the light of the things I have  
to be kept from  
my cold sweat is dew on weeds it isn't  
dawn and they've come in  
to change my clothes to watch  
while I pray the toy-colored rosary  
my pen's in their locker  
the ink in it red beyond help

## LIGHTERS AND KNIVES

*for R. P.*

You learned young:  
the thin-skinned pass  
over candles, singeing the tips  
of shadows that tried to reach you.  
You felt nothing, sang none  
of the music too simple to scream  
without thirty-three years of lessons  
in holding your breath.

The votives don't quiver  
under your finger. You steady the flames  
and aim straight in  
to the wicks. In blistering August,  
you still hide  
exacto stigmata beneath  
long sleeves.

So many nights I've wrapped myself  
in your barbed arms,  
and held you the way I would  
hold myself if I knew why  
you keep each blade this hot, why  
you nest them in such neat rows  
until next time, then gently tighten  
their velvet bows.



## THE CLOTHESLINE PROJECT\*

Thirty-five women tear off  
their shirts. Now they can wash their bodies  
back into the hot single bedroom at three  
in the morning, the air from the alley  
the moon avoided, the rank palm  
clamped over the mouth, the six hours  
it took trying to want to  
live with each spent sinew,  
the approximate height and the scrape  
of the hair and the scar and the slant  
of the laugh remembered  
down to a raw valentine.

Thirty-five wide-awake  
flags of the all-night sky  
wave unabashed at noon, safe wings  
grazing the shoulders  
of women who without touching  
help each other  
get up, get dressed, stay dirty,  
and write their names all over their clothes  
in the blood of the husband, the father,  
the other who keeps their breath  
on the splinter of mirror  
in his hip pocket.

Then again, underneath  
on skin still tender: in the same brash red  
of the roses that rage into bloom  
even though someone still strips them  
of every last thorn.

*\* The Clothesline Project pays tribute to survivors of sexual violence. Survivors and their loved ones write their stories on tee-shirts, different colors signifying different circumstances. These are displayed on a clothesline for one week in April.*

## WHITE SHIRT

You lived  
near the projects, five  
months clean. You had Elena glint your hair  
with strands of light pulled through a cap.  
Your last Dollar Day alive  
you bought two bright used dresses,  
hung your whites out from your window early  
since you'd worked three  
night shifts in a row. Tears blew  
from sheets, your son's tiny jockeys,  
your best blouse. All you keep  
beyond the drag and force  
and unheard moan is this  
bleached tee. White bleeds  
from the weave: the slackened  
grip, the soaring siren, and the stiff drape  
laid across your face,  
grit-smeared; and more grit beneath  
your nails: twigs scraping,  
breath frozen.

## EVE IN EXILE

When God's hand helped me  
break, I thought the pain would kill you.  
We were never meant to heal, so  
I am taking up the snapped wing  
that you gave me then  
  
to drop, disabled, back to where  
the cave of your travail is deep  
with dust, the garden's flowers brittle,  
and it is blessed to remain  
unready. Adam, my sister.

## NOWHERE NEAR BETHLEHEM

Two thousand years from this dawn,  
tell them not one faint grain of starlight  
singled me out: this wind-burned pregnant girl  
leaning into her donkey's neck  
for heat. Tell them

nothing remained of the rugged mirage  
God kept for us but bones of real teak  
and wayward strands of hay  
the wings of skittering angels left,  
no matter what

the texts and the carols  
throw in: the chorus of comfort,  
the listening snow.

## MAGDALENE BATHING

I dare not think of you,  
yet from this riven cross  
the deaths won't stop.  
You were almost no one,  
but each time we touched, a ring scar  
showed up on my finger.  
Now from the nail that aches above  
the pumice stones and oils,  
I drape my stained veil  
from your stained hand. I squat down  
sore and naked and alone  
to be wept clean each starry morning.

SHOULD THIS BECOME ORDINARY

I barely remember the woman  
too weak to go on  
carrying her baby,  
setting him down  
in the trench of the burning road  
to rest on the sleeve  
wilted off her kimono, then  
pressing his head  
with one caked hand  
against a twig of exposed rib  
to feed  
the last of the milk  
her breast could send  
to his patient, gray mouth.

## OLD DOG

When he goes I will feel nothing  
except for the dry blank rush  
past my face, the ache  
pressed black as the scab  
on his wrist where the needle went in,  
and his air hunger deep as a lake  
where the sky sinks day after splashless day  
until it is summer again, and night.  
And the farthest star, the one that can't  
sting the thinnest strand through space,  
the one that keens to be named,  
will be all I have to place—that alone—  
on the blanket still thick with dander  
and coarse white hair.

## REMAINS

Before the dog died, the vet took away  
eight of his teeth. I'd have kept  
each one, had I known  
how soon the rest of him would go.

I'd have made a box for them  
of his empty ribcage: God's  
hand unhinged, stroking a head.  
I'd have kept them

on my dresser, where instead  
he looks straight  
at me: black and white  
of a stilled lens. He doesn't like  
being dead. It's hard work

being the strong cloud  
that stays the same.  
Hard for him, not making a sound  
as ashes gust from my hands.



## SILENT NIGHT

*September 11, 2002*

After the night had fallen, we floated,  
unsignalled, out of our doors  
alone, in twos and threes, with children  
afraid to sleep; passing around  
the one flame left.

Now we hover as close as that  
to the same dim votive, cupped  
in groups on library steps,  
paper plates under our struggling  
candles.

What can we use for stars  
this year? The embers have settled.  
What will come back  
as our plain, dear stars?  
Spent wicks: so warm, so near.

## BLESSING AT THE END OF TIME

Right in the midst of the camels and carts of dry  
sour cherries, a man is unrolling  
his bristly prayer rug. A hand white as mine  
is touching his shoulder.  
Not one cloud has grazed  
this village for weeks, yet in less than an hour  
enemy fire will strike  
his wife and newborn at home behind  
sealed windows. He kneels before buying grain  
for the bread she promised to make tonight  
and prays for me.

## PYRE

Hearing aid, pacemaker,  
dentures. Before the burning,  
these must be removed.  
What swift, safe word  
will I always, always long  
to have yielded  
when the first shy flame  
touched my hand  
like an asking child?

## WHERE SHE ALWAYS WAS

Under the muslin shroud on my mother's  
violin-playing chair is a lap  
where marigolds never could grow, her last  
attempt to stand up. The ladderback  
creaks and fusses: she's flushed  
from her day of trills and legato,  
and now she tilts her sweaty red tumbler  
of lemonade to her solemn lips. I kneel  
before her big cracked feet  
with their yellowy nails, and cool  
her peeled arches with the rays of my hands.  
I roll her bandage-thick hose up to her ankles  
and help her on with her durable lace-up shoes.

I would stay—a daughter, a hanger-onner—  
but evening is falling: its velour robe  
across the upholstery. I would bring her  
the newest dress she'd ever seen,  
its sale tags fluttering,  
its crinkled breeze of rayon

busied with marigolds. Then I would  
tug the big sleeves over  
the pleated flesh of her splendid elbows,  
and press the unblossomed snap  
against the trench of her throat.

## BENEDICTION

Let children find my bones and marvel  
to themselves at my once long, stern legs  
that must have kicked my velvet skirt's pleat up,  
and how the star I hid  
beneath the whitened hair against my nape  
is free, the pearl barrette unclasped; and let them guess  
the way I looked at you: the glance  
of each leaf back onto its linden branch; the dog back  
in the sun's lap, merely sleeping; breath  
behind its dearest kite; then paint,  
wing-colored, on the brush again, and wet;  
the sweet flush in the soul before  
the poem, the kiss  
back in your mind before  
you knew me.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frannie Lindsay's work has appeared most recently in *Field, Folio*, and *Salamander*. This volume also received Honorable Mention in the 2003 Benjamin Saltman Award at Red Hen Press.

Her earlier poems have also been published in *Prairie Schooner*, *The Antioch Review*, *College English*, *The Iowa Review*, *Yale Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *TriQuarterly*, *American Poetry Review* and others, including features in *Agni* and *Great River Review*. New work is forthcoming in *Spire*, *Tampa Review* and *Small Pond Magazine*.

Frannie has been awarded an NEA Literature Fellowship, and residencies at the MacDowell and Millay Colonies, and at Yaddo. She holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She is a classical pianist who lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts with her three retired greyhounds.





## THE MAY SWENSON POETRY AWARD

This annual competition, named for May Swenson, honors her as one of America's most provocative and vital poets. In the words of John Hollander, she was "one of our few unquestionably major poets." During her long career, May was loved and praised by writers from virtually every major school of poetry. She left a legacy of nearly fifty years of writing when she died in 1989.

May Swenson lived most of her adult life in New York City, the center of American poetry writing and publishing in her day. But she is buried in Logan, Utah, her birthplace and hometown.

